

Korean American Poetry

At present, Korean American poetry is a rather small subset of Asian American literature; there has not been a large number of book-length texts published by Korean Americans, and representation by Korean Americans in such important anthologies as *Breaking Silence* (1983) and *The Open Boat* (1993) has been minimal, with the inclusion of only two Korean Americans in the former, and one in the latter. Nonetheless, there are a number of Korean American writers who could be considered significant, well-rounded artists with involving, rich *oeuvres* and unique aesthetic and political philosophies, and who have made their distinctive mark on the American literary landscape. The irony is that most of them—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Walter K. Lew and Myung Mi Kim (the exception is Cathy Song)—would be considered “experimental” or “avant-garde” in their technique, as their writing has chosen to pursue avenues of expression that are at odds with mainstream notions of what poetry and literature is or can be. Cha, author of the book-length *DICTEE*, who has been written about twice previously in *Korean Culture*¹, was absent from both anthologies mentioned above due to her very attention to the possibilities of text presented using avant-garde film and literary techniques. Her work only first found a significant place in the most recent major anthology of Asian American poetry, *Premonitions* (1995), in which, consequently, Korean American poets such as Willyce Kim, Myung Mi Kim, and Sung Rno, along with several others, are also represented.

One could speculate that this high percentage of Korean American poets tending toward experiment is an accident, and that, were there to be more Korean American poets with book-length works, the proportion would appear to even out. Many of the younger Korean American poets writing today, like Jean Yoon and Ann Choi (both represented in *Premonitions*) are not tending toward experiment in their work, and write in expository, descriptive modes that are perfectly acceptable to mainstream publications such as *Parnassus* or *The Paris Review*. However, while the group of accomplished poets is yet small, it is interesting to see that many of the more distinctive voices tend toward techniques of fragmentation, multi-linguism, pastiche, and a sort of multi-media presentation of texts, and that almost all of them were inspired, to some degree, by the writings and works of Cha herself, who died in 1982.

*DICTEE*² had been dismissed for almost a decade by the Asian American critical establishment, and was labeled as “white” and not concerned with community or feminist issues. Lately, the work has been given much wider exposure and has been seen, ironically, as one of the most precise and far ranging expressions not only of the

¹ See Rob Wilson, “Falling Into the Korean Uncanny: On Reading Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*” (Fall 1991), 33-37; and Brian Kim Stefans, “A Search for Lost Time: A Review of Walter K. Lew’s *Excerpts from _____/DIKTE for DICTEE* (1982)” (Spring 1994), 18-25.

²There has been a debate about how the title of the book should appear in print. Lew’s claim is that the word only appears as *DICTEE* in the volume and thus should always be depicted so, whereas many critics use *Dictee* or *Dictée*. When the title appears in a quote, its form is unchanged from that of the author cited; otherwise, the title appears as *DICTEE*.

immigrant experience in the United States, but also the Korean s experience under Japanese colonialism and Korean women s experience in Korea and the U.S. These “representational” elements are all very apparent now, but their meshing with semiotic theory and filmic techniques in the book — a sophistication absent from Asian American literature to that point — blinded a number of critics. As Elaine Kim writes in “Poised on the In-between,” her contribution to the book of essays about Cha, *Writing Self Writing Nation*, that she edited with Norma Alarcón:

What *Dictée* suggested, with its seemingly incongruous juxtapositions, its references to Greek mythology, and its French grammar exercises, seemed far afield from the identity I was after: a congealed essence defined by exclusionary attributes, closed, ready-made, and easy to quantify. I was given to pondering how “Korean” I was as I strove to become “more Korean than thou.” Accustomed to thinking in polarities, influenced by a rather economic understanding of Marxist ideas as elaborated on in community work, familiar with sociopolitical narratives on Korean American identity, and appreciative of realist readings of Asian American novels and poetry, I was totally unprepared for this layered and intensely personal, emotional, and individual text.³

The history and theoretical make-up of *DICTEE*'s reception by the academy is a long and revealing tale, and will not be gone into here. Nonetheless, it is clear that Cha's brief, startling book of texts and images, long dismissed as having little to do with the experiences Korean Americans are supposed to feel, is now, with its satires on French language textbooks and photographs of revolutionary figures such as Yu Guan Soon, understood as a balanced, various and expressive literary production.⁴

Theresa Cha's work ranged from minimalist video to performance pieces to such lesser explored mediums as rubber-stamp mail art (a piece called “Markings”). “Commentaire,”⁵ which she published in a selection of film essays she edited called *Apparatus*, used only a handful of words repeated in several different fonts and sizes

³ *Writing Self Writing Nation*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1994), 4.

⁴ In another essay from this book, called “Unnaming the Same,” Shelley Sunn Wong writes that the “silence” regarding *Dictée* is not to be explained in simple terms of “a critical orthodoxy resisting challenges to its authority, or of tradition bound (and largely realist) forms resisting avant-garde experimentation. Instead, that silence needs to be understood in the context of changing frameworks of reception within the Asian American community, changes that are the result not of transitory literary fashions but, rather, the conjunction of several historical developments in the 1970s and 1980s: major demographic changes within the Asian American community from 1965-1985; the growing strength and influence of the women's movement; the postmodernist concern with fragmentation and multiple personalities; and the emergence of new social movements that necessitated the rethinking of oppositional strategies.” (104) Wong's essay is the best one in the selection, a significant contribution to Cha studies, and the only one in the book that considers the role of the cinema in *DICTEE*. However, this assessment of why *DICTEE* was excluded from Asian American criticism is inadequate, for such issues as “the postmodern concern with fragmentation and multiple personalities” and the “rethinking of oppositional strategies” were all in circulation since the 60s, and that “major demographic changes within the Asian American movement” (meaning, one supposes, the influx of Koreans) should not have been a significant factor, as Cha, who (as Wong notes) eschewed being “representative,” had found admirers in many non-Asians, and presumably could have found them in non-Koreans.

⁵ *Apparatus*, ed. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (New York: Tanam Press, 1981), 260-327.

over the course of several pages, and which included photographs by Reese Williams and Richard Barnes, and stills from a film by Carl Dryer, *Vampyr*. Most of her video, performance, and literary works were concerned with language, an example being “Commentaire” itself, with its elements suggestive of placards from silent films. A performance piece called “Aveugle Voix” involved Cha covering her eyes and mouth with bandanas printed with the French words for “blind” and “voice” suggesting, in a sort of Homeric turn, the equation of the two. *DICTEE*, published the year she died, employs a multiplicity of techniques and voices combined with many literary and historical references, creating a nearly biblical realm of overlapping types and motifs. The book was the culmination of her work thus far.

Though the experience of a Cha video-work could never be imitated in book form many of the videos involve the tracing of ideas over disconcertingly long stretches of time any one of the chapters, and even parts of the chapters, of *DICTEE* could form the conceptual basis of one of her pieces. The juxtaposition of a diagram of an esophagus with the section that describes an attempt at attaining certain speech patterns (an abstract of the process of learning English) is one example, playing on the image/placard technique of “Commentaire.” Another section records her mother’s life under the Japanese occupation, a narrative section that contains significant insight into Cha’s politicized attitudes toward language:

Mother you are a child still. At eighteen. More of a child since you are always ill. They have sheltered you from life. Still, you speak the tongue the mandatory language like the others. It is not your own. Even if it is not you know you must. You are Bi-lingual. You are Tri-lingual. The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue. You speak in the dark. In the secret.⁶

This “speaking in the dark,” which had very real repercussions for a woman in the occupation, also plays into Cha’s preoccupation with the sign, which tends to be an emblem of emptiness in postmodern theory, but is the site of political identity in *DICTEE*. The “tri-lingual,” of course, plays a large role in the book, in which languages vie with each other in the centerless space of the text authored by the cultural exile, hence tracing a formal aspect of Cha’s aesthetics to the survivalist modes and instincts of a Korean in the 1930s .

The section entitled “ERATO LOVE POETRY” is something of a shooting script itself, though it is also highly reminiscent of the French “new novel” that was in vogue at the time. It appears to tell the story of St. Therese of Lisieux and her passionate, mystical marriage with Jesus Christ. It reminds the reader, consequently, of the introduction of Western metaphysics into Korean philosophy, not to mention the concept of martyrdom; it is, in fact, the linking of the animist and Buddhist traditions of Korean thought with a meditative, hermetic Christianity that contributes to the book’s distinctive feeling. The pages do not read across, but each side, the left page

⁶ Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *DICTEE* (New York: Tanam Press, 1982), 45.

and the right page, carry over from the previous left and right pages, so that one is reading two columns of text. The effect is dramatic as texts of vaguer, evocative qualities give way to others that are more determinate, so that the minimalist passage: “Mouth moving. Incessant. Precise. Forms the words heard. Moves from the mouth to the ear. With the hand placed across on the other s lips moving, forming the words... At the same time. to the time. twice. At the same hour. Same time” (sic), gives away to: “One expects her to be beautiful. The title which carries her name is not one that would make her anonymous or plain. ‘The portrait of... One seems to be able to see her... With the music on the sound track you are prepared for her entrance.”⁷ The first quote evokes other parts of *DICTEE* in which Cha describes learning languages, which she does partially by “reading” lips (taken as signs), and it also describes a mental drama, though it is unclear whether it is an interior monologue, like in the novels of Virginia Woolf, or if it is a depiction of the author herself engaged in contemplation of her figures. The latter section, however, has a very definite perspective: it is a shooting script, or the notes one takes when watching a film. Later in the “ERATO LOVE POETRY” section is a still from another film of Dreyer’s, *La passion de Jeanne d’Arc*, a close-up of Renée Falconetti as the saint expressing both sorrow and passion while being sentenced to death for her love of Christ. Cha effectively takes this still and makes it part of her own film, thus layering one more archetype upon her multi-plex of martyr symbols.

The reception of Cha's work by the establishment is somewhat important in the discussion of Korean American poetry, not only because of Cha's importance as a poet, but because many of the main figures in this chronicle are Korean Americans. Elaine Kim, the critic quoted above, is the author of the first book-length work on Asian American literature, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction*⁸. Cha is not mentioned in this very influential book, a fact not initially remarkable since Cha was being published in small press editions that received more attention in the art communities of Manhattan than elsewhere (though, indeed, most Asian American literature had limited printings). One prominent Korean American writer, however, Walter K. Lew, recognized Cha's value early, as is apparent from the introduction to a 1982 short anthology of Asian American poets that he edited for *Bridge* magazine, in which he dedicates the selection to Cha. He has, since that time, been one of Cha's most careful critics and observers, as is testified in his "critical collage" *Excerpts from _____ DIKTE/for DICTEE (1982)*,⁹ a complex visual study that seeks to expand *DICTEE*'s meanings via the presentation of various elements such as source material, suggestive meta-narratives from a Korean children's book (captioned in French), photographs from the war, or citations of *DICTEE*'s themes as they reverberate in such works as Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs d'Hadrien*. Most importantly, the book chal-

⁷ *DICTEE*, 97-98.

⁸ Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982).

⁹ Walter K. Lew, *Excerpts from _____ DIKTE for DICTEE (1982)* (Seoul: Yeul Eum Publishing, 1992). See article on this book by Stefans, footnoted earlier.

lenges the reader to experience it phenomenologically — as a “thing in itself,” as a brief film, as a concrete, complex intervention — thus taking Cha’s work with reader response a step further. *Excerpts* was a major contribution to the understanding of Cha in the Asian American community, and a significant development in the possibilities for criticism in the use of juxtaposed citations and visual imagery, with no authorial commentary — a mosaic of quotation, as had been imagined by Walter Benjamin.

Lew was aware, even in the 1982 introduction, of the relevance of the multimedia for Asian American literature, as is apparent in the part of the essay in which he describes the “five basic genres of Asian American poetry,” which is worth quoting, as they give some insight into what was available to Asian Americans at the time:

Using for now mainly conventional terms, these often overlapping genres... are: DOCUMENTARY; LYRIC; SATIRE; CROSS-CULTURAL ODES; MATRICES... [T]he last one may be unfamiliar ... An incipient form, it employs a wide range of rapidly juxtaposed languages, media, historical frameworks, motifs and rhetorical moods. It is almost demanded by the normally multicultural situation of Asian Americans and the accelerated information flow and collisions of contemporary society in general.¹⁰

Though the term “matrices” did not catch on in the world of literary argot — unlike “projective verse” or “Bakhtinian polyphony” — Lew is describing something that was occurring in Asian American poetry even before the influence of Cha. The poem that he gives as an example of a matrix is Ho Hon Leung’s “A Symphonic Poem ‘Unfinished’ for Rose Li Kin Hong,” a playful piece that employs musical measures, Chinese, and unusual word spacialization. The Canadian poet Roy Kiyôoka, whose work has only found major distribution in the States through Lew’s *Premonitions*, is a master of the matrix poem, such as “an April Fool’s Divertimento,” in which he links together a variety of prose and poetry forms to create a rush of resonant, literary flirtations. Ronald Tanaka, in his bizarre work “The Mount Eden Poems,” employs photographs of, for example, a woman posing as a kindergarten teacher, each photo coupled with a poem dedicated to a different wine¹¹. Though it is not widely used by Asian Americans, the poem as “matrix” is, in general, a very useful form for the poet of the “interstitial” — to borrow Homi Bhabha’s term from *The Location of Culture* — as it allows the organization of disparate elements without surrendering them to closed narrative forms.

Lew, who is not a prolific writer, has been active as a video and performance artist, critic, editor, translator and teacher, and was the editor of Kaya Production, a new American publisher of Asian/Asian diasporic literature. His contribution to the literary annual, *MUAE*, which he edited, was several translations of the poetry of the Korean modernist Yi Sang and a long essay comparing homoerotic themes in that au-

¹⁰ *Bridge* (Winter 1983), 11.

¹¹ Both of these appear, entire or partially, in *Premonitions*.

thor's mirror poems to the writing of Jean Cocteau, such as the controversial *White Book*. *Brine*, Lew's first book of poems, collects the work of over 20 years, and the styles and themes range not only across wide aesthetic and philosophical grounds but also through different biographical phases (though they are not arranged chronologically). The early section of the book contains a somewhat Proustian evocation of an ideal, somewhat charmed youth with wise, humorous elders and celebrations of the freshness of sense impression. Though these themes are not developed in an orderly fashion, there is clearly a preoccupation with Korean tradition — the introductory poem is called "33 Generations at Ssang-Ryong" and the following poem, "Seoul: 1953," ends with the lines:

It is only decades
Later that, tapping the wide glowing jars
I find they contain all that has made
The father have dominion over hers.¹²

This section also includes a translation from a fascinating Buddhist text that informs and advises: "THE GREAT PATH IS BOUNDLESS / not something a narrow practice can seek," thus making the first section suggestive of an Asian American *bildungsroman*, or portrait of the young artist. The Buddhist text almost seems to echo Lew's concerns in such writings as the intro to the *Bridge* selection, in which he states that Asian American criticism has lacked a framework to "lead a writer to a clear conception of a *life-long* quest for mastery."¹³

One of the longer poems in the book is a section from "The Movieteller," based on a performance piece that Lew created in which he reads a narrative over a silent, re-edited Korean film. The poem is a poeticized, textual version of what a Korean *pyônsa* would do at silent movies in the 1920s and 1930s, which is to create dialogue — often subversive in content — for the films, almost all of which were imported. The poem is accompanied by wonderful photographs from Korean silent films, and is concerned with the ramblings of an old retired *pyônsa* himself — ironic, as no such movie had been made then (though one has been made recently in Korea).

I began before leaving technical school,
Telling the Max Fleischer cartoons and Chushingura they showed
Saturday afternoons, top floor
Of the Hwashin department store.
Then the big offers from
Cinemas downtown...
I could not resist — Ciao!

¹² Walter K. Lew, *Brine* (forthcoming from Hard Press), unpaginated. This and the following quotes are taken from the same manuscript.

¹³ *Bridge*, 12.

I said to my chemistry comrades
And splurged at Mitsukoshi's
On a herring bone oba
And some Roman pomade.

The first days, I must admit,

I barely managed:
I sometimes didn't know the movies any better
Than the audience did.

The poem is effective as not only as chronicle of a lost chapter in Korean culture, but, in the context of its placement in the early section of *Brine*, it offers another look at the development of the artist and his or her role in the political act of countering, re-directing or animating meanings. "The people soon liking a void between / themselves and the screen," as a refrain in the poem states.

In *Brine*, these early themes eventually give way to the chaos of adolescence and young adulthood—the embracing of American culture, experiments with alternative sexualities, avant-garde art and radical Korean politics, etc.—and consequently to investigations of different modes of poetry, such as jazz-inspired work, language-centered writing, and even confessional modes. The long poem "1983" is a parody of T.S. Eliot's "Waste Land," and conveys the paranoia and corruption of the United States in its period of greatest covert meddling in foreign governments. The poem's tone is very different from Eliot's, and Lew's version doesn't have the same epigrammatic quality—the satire, for instance, isn't nearly as biting—and yet it has a feel to it peculiar to much of Lew's poetry, especially in its openness to non-canonical information, and in the indeterminate or clipped quality of its meanings. The poem "The Stars and Stripes" evokes something of the confessional poetry of the American 50s, with its detached, alienated observer remarking with irony on the not-so-commonplaces of life:

Saturday night: in beat-up cars, the art school
Gay begin to cruise. Or maybe
They're lowlifes from downtown and Johnston
Thinking I'm from the School of Design.
(I attend the university even further up the Hill.)
One load screams out, "Need a ride?
Wanna slide?" [...]

The poem deftly veers into an entirely different meter to express the suddenness of the refusal, thus utilizing something of the "matrix" aesthetic and creating a more complex aural experience for the reader. The poem "Two Handful of Waka for The-lonious Sphere Monk" is a cross-cultural ode to the great pianist and composer, and is a jazz homage worthy of Lawson Fusao Nada, though with a denser syntax. The "Ga-

Guhm Poems,” which is the final section of *Brine*, is a lengthy pseudo-treatise which concerns several posthumous poems by two individuals who had taken part in an experiment to discover the roots of the “amatory... the biochemical substrate of romantic love.” The collection of poems, written by individuals known only as S₁, and S₂, and some of which were also supposed to have been written by the scientist himself, are funny and cryptic, learned and strangely knowing. The piece, which is itself an anthology, with plenty of Nabokovian fake commentary running concurrent, is also supported by images, some of which are shocking, and it falls in a line as a humorous cousin to Lew’s other literary/visual works, such as the critical collage itself, *Excerpts*.

Myung Mi Kim has gained a lot of attention lately for her spare, evocative but very precise poems, many of which are long or book-length. She presently has two collections available, *Under Flag* (Kelsey St. Press, 1991) and *The Bounty* (Chax, 1996), and a third volume, *Dura*, is forthcoming from Sun & Moon Press. For followers of Asian American literature, she is often seen as a descendent of Cha, and there are moments in *Under Flag* that owe much to her, especially the opening of the poem “Into Such Assembly,” with its questionnaire asking:

Can you read and write English? Yes____. No____.

Write down the following sentences in English as I dictate them.

There is a dog in the road.

It is raining.

Kim’s writing, however, is infused with a political urgency that is reminiscent of the activist tradition that Cha is usually set against, and there is none of the preoccupation with Christian martyrdom or mysticism—the “dictator,” for example, being more specific in this excerpt. These opening lines, which deal with the experience of a government exam, engage in power issues that are concerned more directly with legalities and society than the centerless tri-logism of Cha’s work. Kim uses language much more concretely, harnessing the power of single words to jar rather than lull, and she has a sense of the dissonance that the single odd syllable can play in a line:

Cable car rides over swan flecked ponds
Red lacquer chests in our slateblue house
Chrysanthemums trailing bloom after bloom
Ivory, russet, pale yellow petals crushed
Between fingers, that green smell, if jade would smell
So-Sah s thatched roofs shading miso hung to dry
Sweet potatoes grow on the rock choked side of the mountain
The other, the pine wet green side of the mountain
Hides a lush clearing where we picnic and sing:

Sung-Bul-Sah, geep eun bahm ae

Neither, neither

Who is mother tongue, who is father country?¹⁴

Rereading this passage, one begins to feel that Kim is creating a parody, or bitter imitation, of reverie, rather than being carried away by an emotional nexus of associations. Kim has mastered a very unique, somewhat awkward, but always fascinating sense of prosody, as this excerpt from “Into Such Assembly” demonstrates. Some lines are composed almost entirely of trochees (a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed), for example “Ivory, russet... yellow petals...,” thus rendering the reading experience unsettling. The phrase “rock choked” seems to jump out of the line after the easy movement of “Sweet potatoes grow on the..” This harsh poetics takes on a new dimension later in the poem, which in Kim adopts a voice that is angry and unsettling:

Over there, ass is cheap those girls live to make you happy

Over there, we had a slateblue house with a flat roof where I made many snowmen, over there

No, “th”, “th”, put your tongue against the roof of your mouth, lean slightly against the back of the top teeth, then bring your bottom teeth up to barely touch your tongue and breathe out , and you should feel the tongue vibrating, “th”, “th”, look in the mirror, that s better.¹⁵

The bluntness of the first line and the stubborn “No” that begins the last illustrate that Kim’s politics are those of radical presence in the face of the invisibility, a contrast to Cha who engaged in the creation of personal archetypes, and in the tracing of the self in several predecessor spirits.

Another strong presence in Kim’s work is the poet Susan Howe, whose books *The Europe of Trusts* and *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* have given Kim a useful example upon which to base her own work. Howe’s work is known for its ability to include everything from ballads to seventeenth century prose styles to an all-overedness page layout that is reminiscent of projective verse or certain parts of *Paterson*, and her attention to the sound of the syllable has lead her to break lines off in odd places, sometimes in the middle of words. More importantly, she is also known for her investigations, in her poems, into the nature of historical investigation itself, as she records the presence of her subjectivity while uncovering, as in the case of “Melville’s Marginalia,” such finds as the origins of the character “Bartelby the Scrivener.” Kim matches Howe in her ability to hear and weigh the syllables of American speech, something worth noting as there have been numerous imitators of Howe’s poetics who don’t do

¹⁴ Myung Mi Kim, *Under Flag* (Berkeley: Kelsey St. Press, 1991), 29.

¹⁵ *Under Flag*, 30.

this, and she has used the openness of lyrical historical investigation to expand on many Korea-based themes. This has enabled Kim to explore an equally wide range of styles, so that shorter works, such as the first part of the *Bounty*, called “Primer,” are in fact mini-primers of postmodern poetic form.

The structure of “Primer” is based on that of the Korean written language, *han-gul*, though the whole phonetic alphabet is not represented. Each section is dedicated to a vowel sound or to a consonant, but only in the first, [g], do we see direct correspondence between the consonant and the English words in her text: “g is for girl,” “g is for glove,” “g is for golden,” etc. Kim is clearly, as in earlier works, playing on the conventions of learning a different language, but also those of romantic poetry, as her choice of words are invariably suggestive of innocence, the fetish object, or something beautiful. One is reminded of Kamau Brathwaite’s description, in “The History of the Voice,” of Caribbean poets, weaned on *Palgrave’s Golden Treasury*, writing about the “snow falling over the cane fields.” These sort of obvious associations between the vowel sound and the text disappear in the later sections, and each poem – again, employing the “matrix” form – presents the reader with its own contexts for understanding. The second poem, [n], runs:

In the morning. Called as witness

Privately and publicly. If you have.

The counter cry. Rubric, direction.

I did not rate at the value of a mulberry.
Became.

I made.¹⁶

There is something of the Cartesian *cogito* in the last two lines, but with a distinctive feminist and post-colonial spin. One also thinks, consequently, of the defiance of the “Caliban” figure in Caribbean theory – of the colonized individual using the language that “became” (transitive, “created”) one to curse (the “counter cry”). The private and public mesh in “Primer” right at the level of language, perhaps at the level of the consonant, making this a difficult work to discuss.

Cathy Song is one of the most visible Asian American poets, and also one of the most accomplished. Her first book, *Picture Bride*, won the Yale Younger Poets award – famously, one might add, as all awards that are won within the Asian American community tend to be recorded over and over, as they are seen as markers for success. She has released two books since then, and though her style, often simple and revealing, has not changed much, she has shown a determination to break new

¹⁶ Myung Mi Kim, *The Bounty* (Minneapolis: Chax Press, 1996), 16.

ground in her writing. She has, in several early interviews, distanced herself from being linked to an "Asian American way" of writing, and chose to emphasize, early in her career, that the poet must pay attention to aesthetics over mere proselytizing. Nonetheless, as a perceptive early critique of *Picture Bride* states, Song has had a more unsure relationship with her status as Asian:

In her desire to present an Asian American culture, Song understandably reaches for the sensations, the tastes, smells, sounds, colors, particular to that ethnic experience; some of her most forceful, because original, images come from this reaching out to Asian American particulars. For example, "The children are the dumplings / set afloat... Wrap the children / in wonton skins, bright quilted bundles..." But in this stylistic venture Song sometimes becomes too dependent on linguistic conventions which appear like a nervous tic throughout the poems: jade, sour plums, Mah-Jongg... One almost sees the creative writing instructor breathing over the poet's shoulder, urging her to write concretely about the particulars of her ethnic background...¹⁷

While this criticism may be harsh, its themes are not entirely alien to Asian American discourse, whether it be concerning Amy Tan or *Miss Saigon*, and it points out the relevance of the concerns with language that infuse Cha's and Kim's work. These conventions of Song's fall away, and, as will become apparent, she finds a way to respond to these readers "over [her] shoulder."

As the problematic introduction to *Picture Bride* by Richard Hugo states, "In Cathy Song's quietude lies her strength. In her receptivity, passive as it seems, lies passion, a passion that is expressed in deceptive quiet and even tone... Her senses are lucky to have remained childlike and reception appears to have been a complete act."¹⁸ Song's poems are, indeed, highly sensual, even erotic, but what Hugo may have missed is the sexuality that Song obviously feels for the female body as seen through art. Two longer poems in her first book are dedicated to the highly suggestive paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe, which often mimic the forms of female sexual parts, hence offering, on their large swaths of canvas, monumental odes to the solitary. As Song writes in "Blue And White Lines After O'Keeffe," in the final section called "The White Trumpet Flower" (the poem's five sections mirror the five sections of *Picture Bride*¹⁹):

The hems of your white dresses,
sprigged with cloves and lavender,

¹⁷ *Melus* (Fall 1983), 98.

¹⁸ Cathy Song, *Picture Bride* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), ix.

¹⁹ It is also worth noting that Song's original title for the book was *From the White Place*, after a painting by O'Keeffe.

fenced my playground. You were happy then,
happiest when I played
with the doll family.
They bored me;
I disliked their fragile bodies
and waxy yellow hair
and none of them looked like my father.
But I played with them,
tossing their useless bodies into the air,
because you were pleased and smiling.
But soon, smiles were not enough.
I discovered my own autonomy then,
crawling out from your wide skirts
and into your flowerbeds,
where I proceeded to crucify the dolls,
decapitating your crocuses.
You scowled (and I clapped),
saying, "Georgia,
you are like the dogwood...
a homely name for a goofy flower.
There's just no potential...."

Dear Mother,
you would not like it out here;
in Abiquiu there are no flowers,
not your kind of weather.
I have lived without mirrors and without men
but I can feel my own skin,
how it is parched and crinkled like a lizard's.²⁰

Using O'Keeffe as a mask, Song traces the paths of sexual independence, one that is radical enough to not include men, or even the freshness of the "young bloom" of womanhood, in its parameters. This is unusual to experience in a book that contains so many poems about birth, the family, and even her own infancy (the poem "Tribe"). Song uses the life and works of a sexual renegade to explore her own difference, and one sees a parallel here with a series of poems from David Mura's first collection, *After We Lost Our Way*, concerned with the life and art of Italian filmmaker/poet Piero Pasolini. Images of skin abound in Song's poetry; in the poem "A Mehinaku Girl In Seclusion," from Song's second collection *Frameless Windows, Squares of Light*, she writes "They say my skin / will be as delicate as the light / that touches the spider's

²⁰ *Picture Bride*, 47.

web.”²¹ In “Sunworshippers,” from her latest collection *School Figures*, she writes:

There was folly and irreverence to such exposure,
something only people with dirty feet did.
Who will marry you
if your skin is sunbaked and dried up like beef jerky?²²

While Hugo might praise Song’s “passivity” and “receptivity” in her early poems, it is clear that Song finds independence in the revelation of one’s own physical presence. For Song, commitment to the sense of body and the sensual texture of the work which seems to run counter to an activist feminist poetics that drums its slogans are fused, so that all gestures toward the beautiful are also toward the liberatory. She deserves credit for this commitment, for the turn against plain social chronicling in the time of *Picture Bride’s* publication was somewhat daring, though perhaps less so with the imprimatur of the Yale Younger Poets backing her. While many other themes are considered in Song’s work—family relationships, birth, homages to lost souls—it is probably this fusing of aesthetics, sexuality and liberation that is most distinctive, though it constitutes something of a quiet fire.

Song’s first two books tended to contain carefully constructed poems that didn’t use internal rhyme or very baroque linguistic structures or similes. In *School Figures*, however, she attempts new subject matters and techniques in her writing. The opening poem, “The Story of Madeline,” for example, is filled with internal rhyme, deft alliteration and rich similes and associations. It is highly reminiscent of the best of Elizabeth Bishop, though looser in construction, and prone to nearly Anglo Saxon degrees of alliteration. In its use of a storybook for a subject, it is a poem that resembles some of the ecphrastic pieces from *Picture Bride*, but with a linguistic intensity that the first book rarely achieves:

Drawn as if with quick brush strokes,
wide-brimmed hat and coat,
Madeline is a flash of arms and legs
the day she splashes into the Seine.
Three cheers for the dog Mlle Genevieve that drags her to shore,
river water pouring from her limp body
fish and nasty debris.
Plucked into the cook’s kitchen by a clucking Miss Clavel,
she is stripped, towed and sternly scolded.
No howl of complaint for the gruff treatment,
but a dash for a mouth to indicate a certain achievement.²³

²¹Cathy Song, *Frameless Windows, Squares of Light* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 32.

²²Cathy Song, *School Figures* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 26.

The alliteration in these lines is startling, occurring with a skill that is rare in poetry, though dense soundplay — via puns and dissonance/assonance — has made its way into new literature through a certain theoretical vogue (one thinks of William Gass’s alliteration in his novel *The Tunnel*, which is merely stifling). The play in these lines permits one to see how a word like “dog” splits apart to become “drags” and “shore” in the fifth line excerpted here; similarly, the word “Clavel” offers a sort of release after a line that contains heavy rhyming such as “plucked,” “cook’s”, and “clucking.” Most of Song’s poems in *School Figures* are not like this, but this sort of “figure” (does the title suggest her turning back toward some previous models, an idealized apprenticeship?) demonstrates what Song can do when she permits language room to play, and to court the unusual.

Some younger Korean American poets include Sung Rno, who has turned to playwriting mostly but whose poems demonstrate a very great talent, and E Kim, who is also a video maker, and whose poems tend toward the avant-garde while embracing, at the same time, a deliberate tact of self-exposure. Rno’s poem “The Mounds,” which was stand-out in the Asian Pacific American Journal’s 1993 anthology of Korean American literature, called *Voices Stirring*, contains a breadth and command of line that perfectly mimics the subject matter, the large burial mounds that are, in their geometric simplicity, suggestive of an almost existential barrenness:

You can see them from the highway, studding the hills
as if they were swollen and ready to burst. We buried her
in one of these pregnant graves. I never thought it sad
to give her back to these hills. Better this rolling ground than the concrete
of Ohio, or the white formality of any church...²⁴

Color in Rno’s poem takes on a symbolic resonance, as dirt and soil mix with whiteness in a way that challenges the purity of the funereal moment. The long, sometimes endless-seeming lines suggest the monumental presence of the mounds, which are themselves so simple but overwhelming to experience:

We ate lunch next to the mounds,
the grass getting more brittle and losing color now that fall was coming.
The harvest would be soon, and my uncles who ran the farm
were dressed in cool whites, preparing for the work. We prayed together
and blessed her, patting her soil. My young cousins started to fight.
Their white tae kwon do uniforms became brown with dirt, and when they
laughed

²³ *School Figures*, pg. 3.

²⁴ *Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New North Asian American Poetry*, ed. Walter K. Lew (New York: Kaya Production, 1995), 514.

they had strange expressions. Either too much teeth, or the way their eyes told me things I didn't want to know.

E Kim's poems have appeared in several smaller journals in the past years, though she hasn't herself been prolific. In "The Chance of Rain is Medium," a poem divided into four sections, each headed by a different time and temperature, she adopts something of an indeterminate diary-form (reminiscent of Lyn Hejinian's "new sentence" work, *My Life*), examining, with a hyper-intellectuality, the various minutiae of her day:

Repeated redactions clean the desk up...

Trashed. Settled by landscape, an adjacent time zone enters from the left. Pollen available only in this light. Turning a page like swiveling a chair does not make a pan. The shaded man in the car leaned out to smell something green and colorful. Perhaps the day had changed without a record to break the rested division.

I imagine myself getting on, unendangered by sophomoric. I pretend to outgrow astonishment, ignore the words in a sidelong head. Alack makes the loss laughable. Better left as someone else, these cuts of wood resemble another chair. Getting on or getting on with, one season accounts another. Simulation and a place at any table.²⁵

There is, as in *DICTEE*, a *nouveau roman* quality to this writing, though for Kim there is a domesticity and a humor that is alien to Cha's more hieratic, mystical leanings. Underlying even such a simple poem as "Things to do post-op"²⁶ is a poetics of rapid juxtaposition, as this list-poem includes such things as "vote for Nader," "follow the rhythms of an unassumed past," "wonder if masturbation will quicken or impede recovery" and "try to hear the difference between lawnmowers and helicopters." Some of her poems are almost pure sound, as in "Technical Translations After Robinson After Wang Wei," translations by a spell-checker of poems by Wang Wei which corrupt the avenues of tired orientalism:

Woolly Law Gnome

law gnome sits arrears emote whiskey
lilts swallow ginned emboss sit do
eruptive and in ere evil lay how Dixie?
aerobe ere saw that mix of yen every to
(Meng Wall Hollow)

²⁵ *Arras* 3 (May/June 1996), 85.

²⁶ This and the following poem discussed are unpublished.

Other young poets included in the *Premonitions* anthology are Janet M. Choi and Jean Hyung Yul Chu, both of whom write tense, powerful poems, and video-maker/wig sculptress (among other things) Gloria Toyun Park, who employs a great deal of text in such works of hers as “Red Lolita.” Also worth mentioning is a Korean-born poet named Ko Won, who came to the United States during the Park era. While his English-language poetry is not widely available, it is considered important by many critics seeking to understand the complexities, sacrifices and risks of the Korean political exile.

One thing that is clear in this brief survey of Korean American poets, both major and minor, is that most of the poets are women. Elaine Kim’s explanation for this phenomenon in her essay “Korean American Literature” (1997) is a little unconvincing; she writes that there is greater interest in writing by women, and that, as opposed to the turn of the century, “now more women are immigrating to the United States from Korea than men.”²⁷ She doesn’t explain how a “balance” in the immigration quotas after 1965 created the obvious imbalance of writing by women in the Korean American community. What she also fails to mention, but which is almost equally as obvious, is that many of the major writers in Korean American literature—those who, for example, embrace the entire range of subject matters from the repercussions of Japanese colonization, the gendered hierarchy in Korean society, the semiotics of language education, etc—tend to be experimental, a tendency which cannot be considered only the responsibility of Cha’s influence. The link of experimentation and feminism is clear if one considers the highly theorized positions that have complicated feminism in the 80s and 90s, the crossings of feminist and Marxist thought, and the many feminist (or quasi-feminist) authors who are also experimental writers, such as Yourcenar, Monique Wittig, and Nathalie Sarraute, not to mention filmmakers such as Maya Deren (Cha includes a section of her journals in *Apparatus*). The individualism that is expected of an American female artist, a contrast to a Korean woman artist’s limited role in pre-modern Korean society, may also contribute a desire or necessity to innovate in the face of a different, more liberal, social order. Beyond issues of feminism, Korean and Korean American “experience” can be considered one of fragments, but also one that involves the trauma of a highly conservative, traditional country being wrenched into a pluralist, relativistic society by the colonization of a Westernized neighboring country, by the total decimation of its physical landscape by a war that was fueled by American military technologies, and by the successive leaderships of several ideologues who have sought to impose schematic political systems on their people.

An interesting contrast to the three writers concerned here, Cha, Kim and Lew, is the Korean artist Nam Jun Paik, known now for his monumental television works

²⁷ *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 174.

that seek both to illustrate and to parody the “information age.” In terms of world culture, Paik seems the ultimate global citizen — the “interstitial” artist who has maximalized his marginality — and he has taken that very citizenship as his subject matter. It is, however, no accident that he is Korean; there is, for example, a whole nexus of energies that exist between the Fluxus philosophy that nurtured him and his tradition-bound, somewhat Buddhist upbringing. The seriousness with which Paik paints a long sheet of rice paper with his tie, for example, in one early Fluxus performance, betrays the intensity of his commitment to occupy and discourse with tradition, rather than merely “break” with it. What is obvious, though, is that Paik has erased any sort of transition between his Korean past and his electrified presence, an absence that is typified in the first paragraph of a recent autobiographical statement of his:

Now that I am nearly 60, it’s time for me to practice a bit of dying. People of my age in olden times in Korean were out in the mountains accompanied by a geomancer in search of a propitious site for a grave. However, I’ve no money for that and land prices became so steep, let’s live on and die by ersatz.²⁸

One can credit this great “however” to Paik’s natural flippancy toward tradition, but his cool approach toward death seems peculiarly Korean, as does his focusing on the age of 60.²⁹ He doesn’t gloat on it, nor wax prophetic, like the Anglican Eliot, about his terminus. This sort of irreverence, like the irreverence in his work, is key to his relationship to tradition, but the absence of a middle-ground — a falling out with his past, or a serious meditation on his transition from, for example, an “eastern” artist to a “western” — is equally apparent, which is why one invariably considers some aspect of Paik’s work to be “superficial.”

It is this middle ground that the Korean American poets discussed here have attempted to fill, to reconstruct, though it may never have been there in the first place. Ironically, though Korean art itself is very conservative, much of it stuck in such old schools as Abstract Expressionism, or even Modernist modes such as Fauvism, the most prominent Asian artist in the world is a Korean working with electronics; in the same light, three of the most radical poets in the United States — Cha, Kim, and Lew — are also Korean, and while none of them have embraced the ecstasy of pure information like Paik (or like the Chinese American poet Tan Lin, or the “language” poet

²⁸ *Fluxus: Today and Yesterday*, a special issue of *Art and Design* (1993), 53.

²⁹ See *Ancestor Worship and Korean Society*, by Roger L. Janelli and Dawnhee Yim Janelli (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982). “According to the traditional system of time reckoning prevalent throughout East Asia, 60 years is the length of one complete cycle. Thus, a parent’s sixtieth birthday is marked by a major celebration, traditionally held to denote the completion of an active life.” (44) “Neither folk beliefs nor Confucian ideology, therefore, allow death to terminate parents’ interaction with their offspring. Perhaps this is why Twisôngdwi elders face death with such composure. More than once we were struck by their matter-of-fact comments about the topic.” (85) There is also a connection to be made between the interconnectivity of Paik’s theories and this easy communication with the dead in Korean traditional society, as in, for example, Paik’s works which seek to resurrect — often successfully — the image, mind and spirit John Cage, whom he revered in a peculiarly Korean fashion — generously, and somewhat self-effacingly.

Bruce Andrews) they all share a similar concern, which is with something that could be considered a “middle passage” for Korean American literature. As Henry Louis Gates writes in *The Signifying Monkey* about the process of cultural erasure in the African American Middle Passage:

Common sense, in retrospect, argues that these retained elements of culture should have survived, that their complete annihilation would have been far more remarkable than their preservation. The African, after all, was a traveler, albeit an abrupt, ironic traveler, through space and time; and like every traveler, the African “read” a new environment within a received framework of meaning and belief. The notion that the Middle Passage was so traumatic that it functioned to create in the African a tabula rasa of consciousness is as odd as it is a fiction, a fiction that has served several economic orders and their attendant ideologies.³⁰

There is an absence that is needing to be recovered in Korean American literature, a big *whah?* that lies somewhere between its places of occurrence in the United States — San Francisco, New York, Chicago — the solidly tradition-bound philosophical space that is in the hearts of all Koreans born in Korea, and the trauma of having that country's geography and architecture completely decimated. The waves on the cover of Lew's *Excerpts*, the tracing of Kim's feminist concerns through the centuries back to when *hangul* was a language used primarily by women and her refusal to embrace English on the “level” of standard syntax and expression, and Cha's rediscovery of her maternal past through figures such as Joan of Arc, all suggest an attempt to occupy the space between the “east” and “west,” to narrativize this passage, and, perhaps, to create protagonists where there were victims. That is, these three writers, all of whom are incredibly learned in “western” modes of art, create out of the timeless transitions that exist between multicultural reference — in the human, sweaty spaces between information — something that never existed for Koreans, which is a transitional phase. The concern with time in the work of Cha, whose video works expanded infinitesimal occurrences into stretches of time, and Lew — whose book *Excerpts* contains the date “1982” and was published in 1992, clearly pointing to the decade-long “silence” on Cha's work as the locus of his own — could also be seen as an attempt to counter history's tendency to steal, to pilfer, from the vulnerable their cultural achievements.

For the Korean American artist, there is the distinctive situation of belonging to a culture that has waged war with itself, much of it a “cold war” characterized by extraordinary attempts at misinformation, and fueled by the most hard-edged ideological differences. As the historian Bruce Cumings emphasizes in his new history, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, the debates that have existed in both the north and south have been fueled by splits in Korean political culture that are centuries old. He is con-

³⁰ Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 4.

cerned with reminding all Americans that communism in North Korea is not just a fancy drawn from thin air, but the embodiment of many strands of Korean culture that have, in fact, been more preserved in the North than the South. Indeed, North Korea may be the Korean peninsula's greatest work of modern art at the moment — a half-century attempt at a quasi-Confucian Utopia — as it is a synthesis of the traditional and the modern, and it is so economically impractical and uncompromising as to be understandable only once its realities have completely disappeared — i.e. once it is part of history, and can be seen from all sides³¹. Similar dogmatic strains and ideological splits are also present in Korean American literature, and have kept it somewhat closed and dysfunctional, so that it only grows in bursts, fueled by mavericks, and is yet uncomfortable with its heterogeneous heritage. Nonetheless, the fact that the Korean identity at present is so fissured helps explain why the aforesaid “matrix” — the work of information conveyed through heterogenous channels — has been popular for Korean American, not so much because of its ability to “represent” a Korean American psychological type, but because of its ability to defuse ideological difference, and thus get at the specific indeterminacies of art itself, where feeling and beauty reside.

³¹ This statement, which is to be taken with a grain of salt, is partially inspired by Benjamin's statements on Fascism as the introduction of aesthetics into politics at the end of his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), though with, of course, a very different “aesthetics” and “introduction” involved.